

THE SCHREIBER KOLLEL



FIFTH AVENUE  
SYNAGOGUE  
SCHOLARS

# *A Seder Companion*

COMPILED BY  
THE FIFTH AVENUE SCHOLARS  
OF THE SCHREIBER KOLLEL

# *Introduction*

We are pleased to present this collection of short divrei Torah, prepared by members of the Schreiber Kollel at Fifth Avenue Synagogue. These insights are designed to introduce readers to some of the fundamental ideas underlying the Seder night. Each selection offers a brief window into the rich interpretive tradition that makes Pesach not just a historical commemoration, but a living experience of freedom and spiritual renewal.

The divrei Torah in this compendium are short and accessible, arranged according to order of the Seder, providing opportunities for reflection and discussion as you progress through your own Seder. We hope these thoughts enhance your celebration and deepen your understanding of this special Yom Tov.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to R' Yoel (Joel) Schreiber for his generous support of our Torah learning. He is a true visionary whose care and concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of his fellow Jews knows no bounds. We are grateful as well to Rabbi Eli Babich and Mr. Jacob Gold for welcoming us to the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. Their tireless efforts to help us feel comfortable and help us succeed are greatly appreciated. Thank you as well to the incredible office staff of FAS for their tireless assistance, and to the entire Fifth Avenue Synagogue community for welcoming us so warmly. May we continue to be able to learn and grow together for many years to come.

*Chag Kasher V'Sameach,  
The Fifth Avenue Scholars of the Schreiber Kollel*



# *A Thought on Pesach*

BY RABBI ELI BABICH,  
RABBI, FIFTH AVENUE SYNAGOGUE

One of the most salient features of Pesach is the abundance of restrictions and regulations related to the Yom Tov. On Torah, rabbinic, communal, and familial levels, the notion of adding additional restrictions is commonplace. By contrast to non-kosher food, of which only consumption is forbidden, the Torah prohibits even the mere ownership of Chametz. Our sages added further restrictions, prohibiting one's chometz from remaining in one's possession even after the chometz is declared ownerless. The sages likewise added prohibitions regarding mixtures of food that may contain a morsel of chometz. Furthermore, various communities voluntarily adopted further restrictions. Most famous of these is the Ashkenazic custom to abstain from eating kitniyot on Pesach. Similarly, many have the practice to abstain from eating "gebrochts," matzah which came into contact with water only after it was fully baked and is therefore permitted under Torah law. Some families even refrain from eating any food outside of their own home and limit, as much as possible, the purchase of commercially produced products.

Why is it that Pesach, more than any other time of the year, is dominated by so many restrictions? Perhaps, it is due to the fact that Pesach is the root and foundation of what we hold precious and we thus try to preserve and protect it as carefully as we can. First, it is the foundational Yom Tov of our religion and people. It is the time Hashem revealed Himself to the world and publicly demonstrated His love and concern for our nation. Furthermore, Pesach is the time of year specifically dedicated to transmitting the tradition to the next generation. Seder night marks the addition of another link in the great chain of Jewish history. Such a meaningful moment needs to be carefully monitored and treated with great care and caution. The numerous laws of the Pesach teach us that we ought to proactively protect that which is most important to us and central to our lives: our beliefs and our family.



# *The Unique Opportunities of Pesach*

BY R' YOEL SCHREIBER,  
FOUNDER OF THE SCHREIBER KOLLEL

The month of Nissan is a special month in the Jewish calendar, with unique opportunities for growth and personal development. The Shelah explains that just as every Rosh Chodesh has special sanctity and holiness, the entire month of Nissan, as the first month in the Jewish calendar, has a special quality. It is a month where we have a unique ability to achieve redemption, as it is the month where we experienced the redemption from Mitzrayim. The night of the Seder is also a particularly auspicious time for connection to Hashem.

Rav Yehuda Ashlag, author of the Sulam commentary to the Zohar, offers a beautiful explanation of what it means to be connected to Hashem, one of the most paramount religious ideals. The way to connect to Hashem is to emulate Him, particularly in our relationship with others. Just as Hashem is a giver, Who lovingly gives the greatest good to all of humankind without receiving anything in return, to emulate Him, we must do the same. Our lives should be full of giving to others unconditionally: a smile in the morning, an unexpected act of kindness, the love we give to our spouses, children, communities, and the entire Jewish people.

The alternative is a life of spiritual exile. In Hebrew, גולה. Adding G-dliness, represented by the letter א, since Hashem is the origin and singular being of the world, גולה, exile, becomes גאולה, redemption. This is indeed the ultimate redemption, when we transform our lives into lives of connection with Hashem. This time of year is marked by historical connection to Hashem, and is a time when we remember to keep Hashem as the centerpoint of our lives through emulating His giving. This indeed is true freedom.

## קדש *Kadesh*

While we make kiddush every Yom Tov, tonight's kiddush is different, as it is the first of the Four Cups of wine that we will drink tonight. While we recall Yetzias Mitzrayim every time we make kiddush, tonight's recollection has a special meaning, as tonight is the actual anniversary of that event. Yetzias Mitzrayim is the source of our unique holiness, when Hashem sanctified us, and as such, our kiddush tonight, when we declare the sanctity of this holy day, has special significance.

## ורחץ *Urchatz*

Rebbe Aharon of Belz explains that Kadesh - the recitation of Kiddush over wine - represents kedusha, holiness, whereas Urchatz, the washing of hands before touching food, represents tahara, purity. He points out that, elsewhere, purity is considered a lower state than holiness and therefore precedes it. However, on the night of the Seder, Hashem elevates us to the status of angels, by whom holiness precedes purity, as we find in the recitation of the Kedushah in prayer. We thus begin our Seder with an awareness of the special sanctity of the Seder night.

## כרפס *Karpas*

The Talmud tells us that the primary purpose of this step of the Seder is to pique the curiosity of the children, as they will ask us why we are dipping these vegetables. Some commentators offer explanations as to why in fact we dip now, but others suggest (*Pri Chadash 473*) that, indeed, it has no inherent reason, and we do so purely to engage our children's attention. This is but one example of the paramount importance we place on engaging everyone's curiosity during the Seder, as the invaluable messages of this special night will only penetrate the hearts and minds of those who seek them.

## יחץ *Yachatz*

The Maharil explains that we put aside the bigger half of the matzah for the afikoman since we eat it to commemorate two offerings: the korban pesach and the korban chagiga. We therefore are required to eat two kezaim, olive-sized amounts of matzah.

Many have the custom where the children steal the afikoman. The Kesav Sofer explains why tonight we encourage our children to steal the afikoman, even though we don't encourage such behavior all year round. This is in order to commemorate the miracle of the dogs not barking when we left Egypt, as the entire natural world submitted to the will of Hashem and the Jewish people. Generally, barking dogs scare away thieves. Thus, we allow the children to steal to recall the miracle that no dogs barked tonight.

## הא לחמא עניא *Ha Lachma Anya*

At this point of the Seder we describe matzah as the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate as slaves in the land of Egypt, yet later we say that this is the bread that our forefathers ate as they were leaving Egypt, which associates it with freedom. The symbolism of matzah appears contradictory: it symbolizes both redemption and affliction. One beautiful resolution to this tension is as follows: Indeed, matzah is the bread of affliction. Hashem commanded us to eat it on our way out of Egypt to reinforce its meaning in our national memory. We should remain a nation that never forgets its suffering just as we are commanded by the Torah to always remember our experience of leaving Egypt. For this reason, we follow recognizing matzah as the bread of our affliction by saying Kol Dichfin Yeisei Veyeichol - anyone who is hungry should come and eat. We know what it's like to suffer and we identify with suffering people. Therefore, we open our hearts and homes to the less fortunate by saying that all hungry people are welcome.

## מה נשתנה *Ma Nishtana*

Questions, especially by children, are considered an integral part of the Seder. Rabbi Moshe Meir Lederman of Brooklyn explains that there is a great lesson here. When a child is taught a belief and discouraged from asking questions, he has reason to worry he is being brainwashed. When questions are encouraged, welcomed, and dealt with, we demonstrate confidence in the truthfulness of what we are teaching. With the truth there are always answers. And even when we don't have the answer, we know that answers are out there. This is something children subconsciously absorb: if we welcome questions, we must have nothing to hide.

## מעשה *Maaseh*

The Haggadah presents us with a window into the Seder of these great Rabbis, depicting an all-night affair of them telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt. It does not tell us that they were delving into deep and complicated Halachic discourses the entire night, but rather, merely telling over the story of the Exodus. What took all night?

The Haggadah, at the beginning of Maggid, is conveying a poignant message. It is encouraging us to fully immerse ourselves in the narrative, employ imagination, and engage with the story on a personal level. The fact that these highly knowledgeable Rabbis dedicated an entire night to recounting this story suggests that we, as sophisticated adults, are also capable of thoroughly appreciating and enjoying the narrative.

## אמר רבי אלעזר *Omar Rabi Elazar*

Why does the Haggadah juxtapose the narrative of the Five Rabbis in Bnei Brak discussing the Exodus from Egypt throughout the night with the teaching of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, who speaks to the obligation of remembering the Exodus from Egypt daily? Moreover, why does the Haggadah include Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria's teaching about the daily remembrance when the focus tonight is on commemorating the Exodus specifically on Pesach night?

The Haggadah aims to highlight the purpose of remembering the Exodus tonight by contrasting it with daily remembrance. The fact that we remember the story daily highlights the distinctive nature of the mitzva to experience the Exodus personally during the Seder. Tonight, we tell the story in a way which conveys its personal relevance and impact on our daily lives and choices. The foundation of our religious lives is that we are Hashem's people whom He brought out of Egypt to be His own.

## כנגד ארבע בנים *The Four Sons*

The Haggadah's four sons—wise, wicked, simple, and unable to ask—show how Torah reaches every type of person. Each son receives a different response: detailed laws for the wise, a pointed rebuke for the wicked, a simple explanation for the simple, and gentle guidance for the one who cannot ask. This teaches us that the Torah meets each person exactly where they are, regardless of their knowledge or attitude.

Torah's wisdom is broader than any single perspective. No individual, no matter how learned, can grasp its entirety. The passage of the four sons reminds us that the Torah's account of the Exodus story is divine - it contains within itself all the approaches needed to speak meaningfully to each person's unique situation, no matter how different.

## יכול מראש חודש *Yachol Merosh Chodesh*

The Haggadah here suggests something which seems bizarre at first glance; that one might think that we can fulfill the mitzva of retelling the story of the Exodus any night beginning from the first of the month of Nissan. Why would this retelling not need to be on the anniversary of its occurrence, as is indeed the case for all other commemorations throughout the Jewish calendar? We can suggest the following: that the Haggadah and the Seder are not merely acts of remembering an event, as the other Jewish Holidays are, but a night of reflection on the core of our Jewish identity: our relationship with Hashem and our recognition of the kindness that he showed for us in Yetzias Mitzrayim. This night of reflection is something

so important, so critical, that we need to experience it once a year, regardless of the date. Therefore it is indeed a possibility that this commemoration need not take place on the anniversary of its occurrence.

### **מתחילה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו** *Originally Our Ancestors Were Idol Worshippers*

Why are we bringing this up at the Seder? We understand the importance of telling the Exodus story “from the beginning,” but discussing the idolatry of Avraham’s father seems to take the story back too far!

To understand this part of the Haggadah, we must address a fundamental question about the Exodus. On this night we thank Hashem for delivering us from slavery in Egypt. But wasn’t it Hashem who decreed that we should go down there in the first place?

To fully appreciate the meaning of the slavery and Exodus, we must recognize that the Jewish People faced an existential threat: originally, our fathers were idol worshippers. Our ancestral roots in idolatry meant that as a People, we had little chance of standing firm against the surrounding pagan cultures. Three heroic figures—Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov—stood against paganism and found the One Hashem. With the decline of generations, however, there was real concern that their descendants could not maintain this stance against the rest of the world, and the People of Israel would effectively dissolve. The solution to this problem was going down to Egypt.

The Jewish People were formed not only by the Exodus from Egypt but also by the oppression experienced while there! The Torah refers to Egypt as “the smelting furnace.” Through extreme conditions, a furnace refines metal and removes foreign elements. Forging Jewish identity meant eliminating any affinity with prevalent cultures sharing our ancestry. The persecution by the Egyptians, the most powerful culture of the time, led to a fundamental disillusionment among the Jewish People about what constituted ultimate success.

The Jewish People are referred to as “Hashem’s planting.” When a seed is placed in the ground, it reaches near-total disintegration before attaining a higher level of existence and emerging as a plant. Similarly, being reduced to slavery represented a core deconstruction of the Jews as a People. When Hashem took them out, they entered national existence anew, fundamentally free of their idolatrous roots. This new status didn’t make them impervious to bad habits or incapable of imitating idolatrous ways. However, the essential makeup of the Jewish People had been established, ensuring they would ultimately recover from such lapses and maintain their eternal bond with Hashem.



This is why we mention our idol-worshipping roots during the Seder—it provides the full context for the Egypt experience. Set against this broader problem that began long before Egypt, the entire Egypt experience, including the difficult times, constituted the solution.

### והיא שעמדה *Vehi Sheamda*

The Shibbolei Haleket explains that that Vehi - and this stood for us - refers to the promise Hashem made in the previous passage: the covenant Hashem made with Avraham at the Bris Bein Habesarim that he will redeem us from Egypt with great wealth. The midrash explains that this promise carries forward through each exile. It has stood for us at each stage of our long exile, and indeed carries us through this very day.

### ארמי אובד אבי *Arami Oved Avi*

This portion of the Haggadah is taken from Parshas Ki Savo, from the passage recited by the bringer of the first ripened fruits to the Holy Temple. Why did Haggadah choose these verses to represent the Exodus rather than the verses in the book of Exodus where the story occurs? When one examines the verses carefully, the reason is clear. The verses in Exodus are describing the story from the perspective of a third-person chronicler: the Egyptians oppressed them, they cried out to Hashem, Hashem redeemed them, etc. In the verses chosen, a person is praising Hashem for his personal salvation. That is the feeling we are supposed to have on Seder night, the sense that we ourselves left Egypt. As the Haggadah later says: “A person is obligated to see himself as if he himself left Egypt”. As such, these verses are indeed the most appropriate passages for our retelling.

### ונצחק *Vanitzak*

In this passage we discuss how the suffering Jews pleaded to Hashem and how He acknowledged their oppression and answered their prayers. This is a central element of the Pesach story. The Torah describes that one of characteristic traits of the Jewish people is that Hashem is always close to us and ready to listen to our cries. During the difficulties of the slavery, the Jews experienced Hashem and His Mercy personally. When Hashem answered their prayers, it demonstrated the reality of this essential part of our lives, something experienced throughout the generations.

## ויצאנו... אלה הקב"ה בכבודו ובעצמו *Vayotzeinu*

Why did Hashem take us out of Egypt Himself, instead of sending an angel?

The Maharal explains that this aspect of the Exodus highlights its deeper nature. The Exodus wasn't merely about leaving Egypt—it was about our destination. Hashem didn't simply remove us from Egypt but took us out to become His People. While we typically refer to the event as Yetzias Mitzrayim (leaving Egypt), when Hashem first spoke to Moshe at the burning bush, He used a different expression: *A'aleh eschem*—"I will take you up from Egypt." The Exodus represents a process of elevating the Jewish People to a higher level of existence. The Exodus is midrashically described as a birth process. Just as a baby doesn't simply change location from the womb to the outside world but is born into a higher state of existence, when the Jewish People left Egypt, they transitioned into a new level of existence—the status of Hashem's People.

To create a direct, immediate connection with the Jewish People upon our exit from Egypt, Hashem took us out Himself. This personal involvement adds profound meaning to our understanding of the Exodus and the new mode of existence it established for us. The Gemara teaches that certain "keys" are not entrusted to anyone other than Hashem—childbirth being one example. The Maharal explains that the transition from potential existence to actual existence is something only Hashem can perform, as He represents ultimate existence.

Since the Exodus was akin to a birth, Hashem did not delegate it to an angel but took us out personally!

## מכות *The Makkos*

When recounting the Ten Plagues, we don't simply mention that Hashem punished Egypt—we name each plague individually and spill a drop of wine for each one. This ritual highlights a crucial aspect of the Exodus: Hashem didn't merely strike Egypt with a single devastating blow, but rather executed ten distinct plagues that systematically affected every dimension of Egyptian society—their water, land, livestock, health, light, and ultimately life itself.

The specificity of the plagues and our corresponding ritual reveals the precise nature of Hashem's involvement in Jewish history. By reciting "Dam, Tzfardea, Kinim..." and removing wine drops for each, we acknowledge that Divine intervention isn't vague or general—it's detailed, intentional, and comprehensive. Just as no aspect of Egyptian society was left untouched by the plagues, no part of our

lives exists beyond Hashem's specific concern. This teaches us to recognize divine involvement not just in broad historical movements but in the particular details of our national and personal journeys.

### **דיינו** *Dayyeinu*

Why do we declare “Dayyenu” for incomplete acts like bringing us to Mount Sinai without giving the Torah? This seemingly puzzling prayer teaches us that each step in our redemption deserves its own recognition. When we isolate each divine act, we train ourselves to appreciate the inherent value of every blessing, not just its final outcome. Dayyenu challenges us to recognize that even partial kindness deserves complete gratitude.

It is easy to focus on what's missing, but Dayyenu reminds us to expand our appreciation for what we have. By acknowledging the significance of each stage in our journey, we develop the spiritual capacity to find value in every experience. This practice transforms our perspective and teaches us to recognize the blessing in each incremental step Hashem provides, enabling us to developing a more complete and authentic gratitude.

### **פסח מצה ומרור** *Pesach, Matzah, and Maror*

Rabban Gamliel teaches that we must explain Pesach, Matzah, and Maror to fulfill our Seder obligation. This requirement connects these foods to specific Torah verses that explain their historical significance. The Pesach sacrifice represents Hashem's protection, Matzah recalls our hurried departure, and Maror evokes slavery's bitterness. By both eating these foods and explaining their meaning through Torah verses, we don't just remember the Exodus—we experience it directly through multiple senses.

The Torah is what gives the Exodus eternal relevance in Jewish life. When we recite verses explaining why we eat Matzah or Maror, we're not merely recalling history—we're reliving it through the framework the Torah provides. This is one of the Seder's central themes: the historical Exodus becomes our personal experience through the Torah's interpretive lens. Unlike other historical events that gradually lose significance, the Exodus remains immediately relevant because the Torah connects it to practices we still perform today. By engaging with both symbolic foods and their Torah explanations, we ensure that the Exodus story continues as a living reality that defines Jewish identity across all generations.

## בכל דור ודור *Bchol Dor Vador*

In arguably one of its most fundamental passages, the Haggadah redefines the nature of the mitzva to retell the events of the Exodus. As opposed to other holidays, where we express our appreciation of events long past and their effects on our lives today, tonight we are instructed to view ourselves as having actually left Egypt. In light of this, some have the custom to reenact parts of the Exodus story to bring this experience to life.

This requirement reflects something deeper as well. We often talk about how being a Jew entails being part of something greater: the entirety of the Jewish people. When we connect to the difficulties of our brethren across the world and at home, we reinforce this awareness. But there is another “greater” Jewish people: the “vertical” whole. The Jewish people extend backwards through history, traveling the elevator of history, experiencing each epoch and persevering, shining its light upon the world. Only when we view ourselves as part of this unit, when our identity is that of part of the historical Jewish people, only then do we fully connect to the experience of leaving Egypt.

## לפיכך *Lefikach*

Maggid concludes with the recitation of the first two paragraphs of Hallel, a song of praise. The Haggadah suggests that the outcome of recounting the story of the Exodus is the obligation to recite songs of praise. This spontaneous breaking into song represents successfully perceiving oneself as if he had personally left Egypt. Since the feeling of having left Egypt is personal, breaking into song is the natural reaction. For this reason, the Haggadah prefaces the Hallel with a reminder of our obligation to retell the story: “Generation by generation, each person must see himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt. Therefore, it is our duty to thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, raise high, and proclaim... Halleluyah!”

## אשר גאלנו *Asher Ga'alanu*

In the concluding passage of Maggid, we thank Hashem for our redemption. Notably, however, we offer a prayer for the future. We recognize that the Pesach we currently experience is incomplete, as we cannot experience the true closeness to Hashem without a Holy Temple and the special services that accompany it. We pray and anticipate the day that we be able to experience our redemption in the fullest, full of joy, in a Jerusalem rebuilt, may it happen soon.

### מַרְרֵר וּכּוֹרֵךְ *Matzah, Maror and Korech*

Hillel's sandwich of Pesach, Matzah, and Maror offers a powerful insight into how we grow through life's challenges. By combining the symbol of freedom (Matzah) with the symbol of suffering (Maror), Korech shows us that our bitter experiences help shape our journey toward redemption. This ritual teaches that the hardships in Egypt weren't merely obstacles to overcome but transformative experiences that prepared us for freedom. Korech helps us recognize that difficulties often lead to growth and positive change. We are reminded that today's struggles, too, can lead to tomorrow's growth—the bitter experiences we face may be precisely what prepares us to receive and value our future blessings.

### בָּרֵךְ, הַלֵּל, נִרְצָה *Barech, Hallel, Nirtzah*

We begin Hallel before the meal but complete it only after we eat and recite Birkas Hamazon. This deliberate split places our meal within a framework of praise. By starting Hallel before eating and finishing it after, we reframe our dinner as a spiritual experience of freedom. The structure reveals the true focus of Pesach night. While the festive meal is important, it's not the ultimate purpose of our celebration. Hallel refocuses our attention on what truly matters: our relationship with Hashem and the miracle of redemption. The psalms we recite speak of Hashem's might in history, reminding us that our freedom came through divine intervention. By returning to praise after eating, we declare that physical satisfaction isn't the end goal, rather, it's recognizing Hashem's hand in our lives. The meal becomes a means to deepen our appreciation for freedom, not an end in and of itself. We conclude with Nirtzah, briefly acknowledging our hope that our service has been accepted and connecting the generations of miracles on the Seder night.

לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם  
*Next Year in Jerusalem!*